

## Christmas Eve 2016 Sermon Late Service

### Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

*[In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.]*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Most of you have seen or used Google Earth. With this remarkable piece of software, you start with a view of the whole earth, and tap or click on the area you want to zoom in on. A few taps or clicks, and you see the United States; another few taps or clicks and you see Colorado; a few more and you zoom in on a street view of your very own house.

Now Luke lived almost 2000 years before Google Earth, but he certainly understood the concept; for he starts his story of Jesus' birth with a wide-angle lens, viewing the whole of the world he knew – the world of the Roman Empire

and its mighty ruler: "... a decree went out from Emperor Augustus," he writes, "that *all* the **world** should be registered." So the *first* snapshot Luke takes, with his wide-angle lens, is of "all the world." With his next bit of information, "...when Quirinius was governor of Syria..." – Luke zooms us in on the far Eastern end of the Roman Empire – what we now know as "The Middle East." Then Luke zooms in even further, to one man and one woman on a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a small village about as far away as you could get from Rome, the center of worldly power. And Luke tells us that Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Luke has finally zoomed in as far as he can go: to one newborn baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

Now if you had never heard this story before – never heard of Mary, Joseph, or Jesus – if you are hearing this story for the first time, you might be asking yourself, "So, what's so important about this baby? What child is this, who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?" And that's exactly the question Luke *wants* his readers to ask; and to answer it, he begins to zoom out, from the Google street view of the stable and the manger, to the whole town of Bethlehem, then to the hills outside of Bethlehem, where shepherds are watching over their sheep. And then he zooms *in* on **that** scene. "In that region," he writes, "there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."

Now, all of Luke's story *to this point* is a rather ordinary recitation of mundane facts.

Then, in a statement *startling* in its simplicity – **and** strangeness! – we are told, "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were **terrified**." Now here's where Google Earth would fail us, even if its cameras had been present that night: for this angel is from nowhere on earth, but rather from a different realm entirely, a realm where the laws of physics are such that one can appear and disappear at will. It is doubtful that Google's cameras, following the physics of *our* world, could have recorded an angel from that other realm – the realm where God's glory abides undiluted.

"The glory of the Lord shone around them," Luke writes; and that would have been a *significant* statement to anyone familiar with the Hebrew Bible (which was the only Bible that existed at that time). For you see, in the Hebrew Bible, the "glory of God" inhabited the *Temple in Jerusalem* after Solomon built the Temple in about 900 B.C. But some 300 years later, according to the prophet Ezekiel (ch. 10), the people of Israel became corrupt and disobedient, and the glory of God **left** the Temple, allowing it to be destroyed by the Babylonians. After 50 years in exile in Babylon, the people of Israel return and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem; but there is no Biblical record that the glory of God *ever* returned to the Temple. But *now*, **here** the glory of the Lord shines not in the Temple, but around shepherds out in the field, causing them, in Luke's literal words, "to be afraid with a mega-fear." Bible scholar Joel Green writes: "...the appearance of the

divine glory [to the *shepherds*] is remarkable. God's glory, normally associated with the Temple [in Jerusalem], is now manifest on a farm! At the birth of his son, God has compromised... the socio-religious importance of the Temple as the culture center of the world of Israel. Luke thus puts us on notice that the new world coming is of a radically *different* shape than the former one..." (Joel B. Green, "*The Gospel of Luke*," The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997, p. 131)

"Do not be afraid," the heavenly messenger tells the shepherds, "for behold – I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all** the people." **All** the people: not just those pious Jews who spend all their time in the Temple. Not just the reputable people, but also those who inhabited the lowest rungs of the social structure. People like these shepherds, **and** those for whom there is no place in the inn, like Mary and Joseph (who will soon become refugees in Egypt). Good news of great joy for **all** the people: not just God's chosen people, the Jews, but Gentiles, foreigners, unclean lepers, prostitutes, oppressive Roman overlords and hated Samaritans.

The angels return to heaven, the shepherds go to see the child, and then they return to their fields, "glorifying and praising God..."

And *that* is Luke's story of the birth of Jesus.

But we are left with the question: What does it *mean* to **us**? To you and to me?

At the very least, I think, Luke wants us to realize that the message of the angel is **not** just to shepherds in a field outside Bethlehem 2000 years ago; it is a message to Luke's readers down through the centuries – a message to you and me. "Christ could be born a *thousand* times in Bethlehem," wrote a 17<sup>th</sup> Century mystic [Angelus Silesius], "but all in vain until He is born in me." All in vain, until He is born in you and me. To **you**, and to **me**, is born *this day*, Dec. 24, 2016, a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This birth is God's gift of love to us, the gift of God's own self come into human flesh; and God wants nothing more than for us to *receive* that gift into **our** flesh, **our** hearts and minds and bodies, and let it *transform* our lives. For Jesus was not born at Christmas simply to lift our spirits and warm our hearts in the dark cold days of December. The Son of God is not born into human flesh to rehabilitate our *old* lives or to make them a bit more bearable, or to give us **more** of the life we already know. No; Christ has come that we might have a *whole new life*! "Born to give us second birth," Charles Wesley puts it in his marvelous Carol. It is Scrooge waking up on Christmas morning a totally different human being: no longer a disgruntled, self-centered, miserly misanthrope, but a totally new person, generous, compassionate, and full of joy! "Christ could be born a *thousand* times in Bethlehem, but all in vain until He is born in me." That's what happened to Ebenezer Scrooge: Christ was born *in him*! And although Luke doesn't tell us, I

have to believe that that's what happened to those shepherds, too, from that day on. And I believe that is what is *meant* to happen to you and me. For God's gift of his own Son has no meaning unless we receive that gift into the manger of *our* lives, and are transformed, becoming gifts to others. For when the Christ child is born in us, *all* of our actions become, as it were, transmissions of his divine love. Such simple things as a smile, a touch, singing a hymn, wrapping a present, opening the door for someone, petting our dog – all of these most ordinary actions become gifts of divine love.

Christ is born in Bethlehem, and nothing changes; Christ is born in you and me, and *everything* changes. For God coming into our world has no meaning unless we continue the work of Christmas, taking his gift into ourselves that **our** lives might *become* gift to a very mixed-up, violent, and love-starved world.

“To **you** is born this day... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

So let our prayer tonight be that of Episcopal bishop Phillips Brooks, who wrote in his Christmas Carol: “O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be *born* in **us** – *today!*”

AMEN